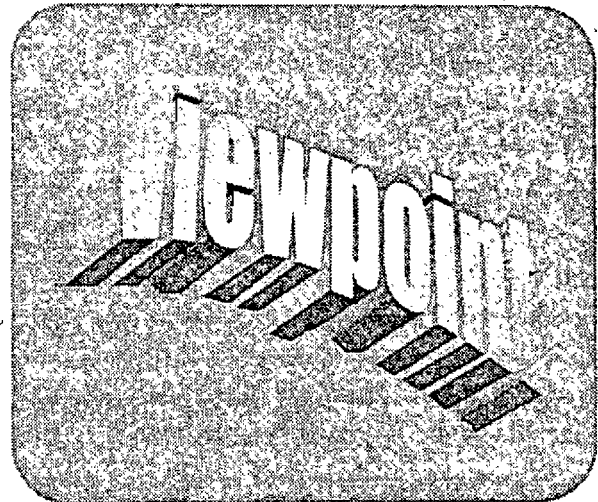


The Values of the Earth Charter in Education for Sustainable Development

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Introduction

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning.... This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom (*The Earth Charter, The Way Forward*).

Such advancement of high-minded values, such changes of mind and heart, and such senses of interdependence and responsibility across culture can only be achieved through education. Realising culturally rooted visions of sustainability and searching for cross-cultural collaboration is, inherently, a process of education. The Earth Charter Initiative has said from the beginning that the Earth Charter is an educational resource of significant value.

The art and science of teaching about, from, with, and for the Earth Charter offers a promising pedagogy for exploring such shared values and global ethics. Many of the problems we face are ethical problems. Therefore, the solutions must be solutions to which ethics point.

History and Structure of the Earth Charter¹

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations (*The Earth Charter, Preamble*).

The drafting of an Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In 1994, Maurice Strong, Secretary General of the Earth Summit and Chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter initiative in The Hague with support from the Dutch government. An Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the project, and an Earth Charter Secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica.

To the best of our knowledge, the Earth Charter Initiative has involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document. Tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from all regions of the world, different cultures and diverse sectors of society have participated. The Charter has been shaped by experts, government and civil society leaders, students, and representatives from indigenous groups and grassroots communities. I believe it is an important expression of the hopes and aspirations of the emerging global society. It is part of a growing worldwide people's movement pursuing major challenges in our values and institutions in order to ensure a better future for all. It is, truly, a people's charter.

A final version of the document was released by the Earth Charter Commission in March 2000, and a new phase of the Earth Charter Initiative began, which involved circulation of the document as a people's treaty throughout the world in an effort to promote awareness and commitment to a sustainable way of life. The major objectives of the Earth Charter Initiative are to promote a worldwide dialogue on shared values and global ethics; to set forth a succinct and inspiring vision of fundamental ethical principles for sustainable development; circulate the Earth Charter throughout the world as a people's treaty, promoting awareness, commitment, and implementation of Earth Charter values; and seek endorsement of the Earth Charter by the United Nations General Assembly.

The Preamble of the Earth Charter briefly describes the cosmological and ecological situation and the major challenges

and choices facing humanity. There follow sixteen main principles, which are divided into four parts. Each part contains four main principles with a number of supporting principles that elaborate the meaning of the main principles. The principles in the Charter are formulations of fundamental ethical guidelines and major strategies. The Charter does not attempt to describe the mechanisms and instruments required to implement its principles. This is a task for other international legal instruments and for national and local sustainable development plans.

Valuable Educational Uses

Discussion of the Earth Charter in classrooms, conferences, and workshops can heighten awareness of the basic challenges and choices that face humanity. It can help people to think globally and holistically. It can focus attention on fundamental ethical issues and their interconnectedness. It can serve as a catalyst for cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue on shared values and global ethics. It can be used to generate in individuals and communities the kind of internal reflection that leads to a change in attitudes, values, and behavior (*The Earth Charter Handbook*).

Depending upon the cultural context, educational aims, and ages of the learners, the Earth Charter offers many possibilities for education. These include:

As a way of defining sustainability—through its conceptual framework and the content of the principles;

As an example of the interrelatedness of social, political, economic, and environmental problems;

As a conspectus of the debate on the pluralism of thought that ought to be included in sustainable development;

As a framework for sustainability education;

As a model of a democratic, decentralized process by which a people's charter was created;

As a hopeful saga of global cross-cultural collaboration in activism and education;

As a tool to communicate the meaning and significance of values and ethics;

As an entry point, through individual principles, to exploring specific issues and for further discussion of actions that are ethical and sustainable;

As a method to clarify and justify, through individual subprinciples, concrete issues as well as contextual and related ones;

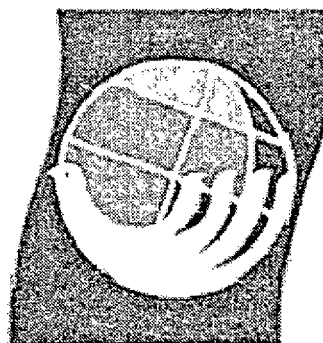
As an ethical declaration of global interdependence

and universal responsibility opening the debate on which ethics and whose ethics are/ought to be privileged;

As an inspiring declaration of common ethical ground influenced by the wisdom of diverse indigenous peoples, international law, peoples treaties, contemporary science, and philosophical traditions of secular and religious belief; and

As an integrated and inspiring vision of caring for all life, universal human rights, economic justice, and the creation of a culture of peace.

Education, in all its forms, will play an indispensable role in addressing the crucial challenges of sustainable development. I believe the Earth Charter is a rich source of educative possibilities and questions. It is a wholesome conception of sustainability that can assist us in teaching and research.



The Earth Charter has been utilised in diverse cultural and geographic settings for a multiplicity of educational purposes. In Kenya, the Earth Charter is used in community development and forest conservation programs. These educational initiatives are directed toward care for people and to hold the government accountable. The founder and coordinator of the Green Belt Movement, Wangari Maathai, has written, 'there are enormous thought provoking words in this document and what we should do is instead of just reading through, reflect on what these words mean so that we can be moved to action.' The Earth Charter serves as a values framework for the Green Belt Movement, which is now in seventeen African countries.

In the municipality of San José, Costa Rica, the Earth Charter was the inspiration for the integration of ethical principles in the daily work of 1,800 San Jose city workers including police, sanitation, and health workers, and administrators. In fifteen training sessions over six months, a plan for sustainable development and a code of ethical behaviour were developed.

In Brazil the Earth Charter movement is under the intellectual leadership of Earth Charter Commissioner and theologian Leonardo Boff. He has presented the Earth Charter on many occasions and greatly raised public awareness of the Earth Charter. There have been several conferences on the Earth Charter and adoptions at the local level. For example, the Earth Charter is incorporated into the curriculum of the public

schools of Sao Paulo with one million students. The work of the Paulo Freire Institute has been significant in interpreting the Earth Charter and in conscientization based on its principles. Moacier Gadotti, Director of the Institute has written 'the Earth Charter should be construed especially as an ethical global movement that will lead to a planetary code of ethics, upholding a core of principles and values that strive against the social injustice and inequality that currently prevail in the world'.

In Australia, there has been considerable activity including a large Asia Pacific Regional Earth Charter Conference in Brisbane and activities including diverse sectors of Australian society. According to the *Earth Charter Initiative Handbook* (p. 33):

The National Earth Charter Committee together with The Education Professionals (curriculum consultants) has developed primary and secondary high school curriculum material based on Earth Charter themes integrated with the national curriculum framework. These materials are currently being evaluated in schools within the education system of the Australian Capital Territory. The National Committee is also developing criteria and systems to support ethical investment in partnership with the Wilderness Society of Australia and Henderson and Walton Consultants. In 2000, the Earth Charter was presented at a national forum called Business Leaders for Sustainable Development attended by approximately 100 CEOs. As a result, a number of companies have agreed to participate in a steering committee to establish a multi-stakeholder national council for sustainable development in Australia under the aegis of the Earth Charter.

An example of grassroots community action is the Ngadjuri Earth Charter Group. This is a collaboration between rural women in the Barossa Valley and the Wirrigu, a local indigenous group. A long-term commitment has been made based on principle 12 of the Earth Charter. Activities have included sequential discussion of Earth Charter principles and creation of a Ngadjuri sanctuary

In my own teaching with university students, with fellow academics in colloquial discussions and conferences, and with community activists I use the Earth Charter as an alternative vision of possibility in a globalised world. We know the problems created by the current development model. As the preamble to the Earth Charter itself says:

The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

The Earth Charter provides a vision of what might be. The preamble also says:

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

I am convinced that we need such a hopeful and sound vision of a sustainable future. The Earth Charter principles result from a successful process of convergence on norms that are widely shared. These core values, so clearly articulated in the Earth Charter principles, give us much to go on as we work to bring sustainable development into being. They are substantive and specific. Earth Charter principles articulate common ethical values that are compatible with many indigenous beliefs, worldviews, religions, and secular philosophies. They help us interpret our beliefs in light of the perilous trends of our current development path. They express these values as a global, civic ethic of specific rights and responsibilities.

In my experience, by articulating common concerns and common values, the Earth Charter provides a rich vision. By being part of a participatory, inspiring process it gives us a hope that the vision is viable. By specifically articulating a vision of sustainable development, it provides a path to take. It is not the only path and surely it is not the last word on a global ethical framework, but it is an invitation to reflect on the significance of globalisation for life on earth. It is also a call to consider the responsibility of the academy to raise issues related to the direction in which globalisation is going. If our way of life is to be a sustainable one, if globalisation is to be humane, we in higher education need to engage deeply in such challenges.

As Brendan Mackey, Director of Education for the Earth Charter and Professor at the Australian National University has written, the core values of the Earth Charter 'are life affirming, promote human dignity, advance environmental protection and social and economic justice, and respect cultural and ecological diversity and integrity.' In my opinion, they are an excellent place to begin. They represent serious intellectual and cultural efforts to chart a course toward global responsibility and global sustainability. How we manage globalisation will determine the quality of life on Earth. Institutions of higher education, in particular, have a moral obligation to examine critically globalisation and seek to move it in a direction that is humane, just, and sustainable. The Earth Charter provides an ethical framework for this urgent task.



Note

- 1 This section relies on several descriptions of the process and content of the Earth Charter and especially the *Earth Charter Briefing Book* and *The Earth Charter Initiative Handbook*. The major author is Steven C. Rockefeller, Chair of the Earth Charter drafting committee.

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